

Description

INFLATABLE, SELF-SUPPORTING SPORTS TRAINING AID

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application claims priority from Provisional Patent Application No. 60/515,281, filed October 28, 2003 by David S. Ross and Ilona G. Ross, titled, "Baseball and Softball Training Aid."

BACKGROUND OF INVENTION

[0002] This invention relates to a training aid for various sports, such as for training baseball and softball pitchers. In particular, it relates to an inflatable, self-supporting figure of a batter held upright by means of weighted feet.

[0003] A number of pitching aids have been designed to help a baseball or softball pitcher to improve his pitching. These aids are often two-dimensional figures of a batter that are not self-supporting and must be held in a vertical position by a stake driven into the ground (U.S. Patent No. 6,350,211) or by means of a horizontal base (U.S. Patent

No. 6,322,461). They may be constructed of hard materials that, when struck by a ball, will cause the ball to deflect at unpredictable angles, possibly hitting people who are nearby.

SUMMARY OF INVENTION

[0004] We have invented a training aid that is inexpensive, self-supporting, and can easily be transported and stored. The training aid of this invention is a three-dimensional inflatable figure made of a soft, pliable material. When it is struck by a ball, it absorbs the kinetic energy of the ball so that the ball drops to the ground a short distance away. Water or sand may be placed in the feet of the training aid so that it stands by itself, without the need to drive a stake into the ground or provide a support for it.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF DRAWINGS

[0005] Figure 1 is a perspective view of a certain presently preferred embodiment of an inflatable batter according to this invention.

[0006] Figure 2 is a perspective view of the back of the head of the inflatable batter shown in Figure 1.

[0007] Figure 3 is a perspective view of the bottom of the head of the inflatable batter shown in Figure 1.

[0008] Figure 4 is a perspective view of the arms and bat of the inflatable batter shown in Figure 1.

[0009] Figure 5 is a perspective view of the feet of the inflatable batter shown in Figure 1.

[0010] Figure 6 is a perspective view of the top of the shoulders of the inflatable batter shown in Figure 1, with the head removed.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0011] In Figures 1 to 6, inflatable batter 1 (Bullpen Buddy™) is assembled from two parts, head portion 2 and body portion 3. Head portion 2 is a three-dimensional inflatable chamber in the shape of a human head 4 and neck 5. Head portion 2 may be inflated by forcing air into a valve 6 (Figures 2 and 3). Valve 6 is located at the back of neck 5 (see Figure 2), but it may also be located at another position on head portion 2. Head portion 2 may be realistically designed with protuberating ears and nose and a narrower neck 5. Head 4 may have a face, hair, and under-eye black lines printed on it. The base of neck 5 may be flat (see Figure 3) and have patch 7 fixed to it. Patch 7 may consist of either exposed fabric or exposed small hooks (sold commercially as Velcro).

[0012] An optional cloth baseball cap 8 may be placed on head 4,

as shown in Figure 1, or cap 8 may be part of inflatable head portion 2.

[0013] Body portion 3 is three-dimensional and inflatable. Body portion 3 is in the shape of a human torso with separated legs and separated arms attached. Body portion 3 has five parts: an upper body 9, which is inflated through valve 10 (Figure 1), a lower body 11, which is inflated through valve 12 (Figure 1), arms and bat 13, which is inflated through valve 14 (Figure 4), and feet 15 and 16, which are inflated through valves 17 and 18, respectively (Figure 5).

[0014] Feet 15 and 16 are provided with additional valves 19 and 20, respectively, (Figure 5) through which a liquid or a solid particulate material, such as water or sand, respectively, may be poured into feet 15 and 16. The only support for inflatable batter 1 is weighted feet 15 and 16. The bottom of feet 15 and 16 is substantially flat, enabling the figure to stand in a rigid position so that it does not rock back and forth.

[0015] Centered at the top of upper body 9 is patch 21 (see Figure 6), which may consist of either fabric or small hooks (sold commercially as Velcro). (If patch 7 is small hooks, then patch 21 is fabric and vice versa.) Head portion 2 may be attached to upper body 9 by pressing patch 7

against patch 21 and it may be removed from upper body 9 by simply pulling it off. Head portion 2 is preferably attachable turned in any position relative to body portion 3, and it is particularly preferably that it is attachable turned in either a left-facing position or a right-facing position so that it faces left for a right-handed batter or right for a left-handed batter. Head portion 2 may be attached to body 3 by any means that will permit it to be repeatedly removed and re-attached. While Velcro is the preferred means, snaps, latches, ties, and other means may also be used.

[0016] Inflatable batter 1 is preferably in the form of an adult male batter, who is wearing a replica of a professional, college, high school team baseball or softball uniform. The uniform may have the colors and style of a particular team or it may be a generic uniform. Preferably, the batter is holding the bat in a ready position, as shown in Figure 1, though he could also be holding it in another position, such as a swinging position. The adult inflatable batter is preferably about 5 1/2 to about 6 1/2 feet tall. A smaller size for children is preferably about 4 to about 5 feet tall. A children's inflatable batter may be in the form of a child, a cartoon character, professional sports figure, or another

form that may appeal to children. The face may be designed in the likeness of a professional athlete. The inflatable figure may also be in the form of a player of other sports. For example, the figure may be a soccer goalie or a hockey goalie, so that a player can practice kicking a soccer ball or hitting a puck into a goal while avoiding the goalie. It may be a basketball defender with outstretched arms to provide practice dribbling around and shooting over a defender. A tennis player figure may be used to practice hitting a tennis ball within the lines but away from the figure.

[0017] The inflatable batter shown in the drawings may be made by blow molding independently inflatable chambers in the shapes of the head portion, upper body part, lower body part, arms and bat, and left and right feet, then welding or gluing the chambers together. A compartment for holding the sand or water may be molded and that compartment may be inserted into the feet. The valves may be welded on to the chambers, so that air can be pumped or blown in and the chambers sealed to keep the air in. The designs may be printed onto the face and body. Patches 7 and 21 may be glued or otherwise attached at the positions shown in the drawings. The chambers may be made from

a flexible plastic, such as polyethylene, polypropylene, or polyvinyl chloride; polyethylene is preferred. The use of multiple chambers simplifies inflating the figure and locating leaks.

[0018] The figure may also be made in other ways. For example, the body portion may be made with fewer chambers so that there is less welding and fewer valves. However the body portion preferably has at least two chambers and preferably the legs are part of a separate chamber so that they can be made more rigid by inflating at a higher pressure. Flexible splines may also be attached to the legs or the legs may be double seamed to provide additional support if desired.

[0019] To use the inflatable batter of this invention, the head portion and the various chambers of the body portion are inflated and sand, water, or another heavy pourable material is placed inside the feet. The head is attached facing either right or left towards the pitcher. The pitcher then throws a baseball or softball in front of the batter. This acclimates a pitcher towards throwing at a real batter and gives him an opportunity to try various pitches, such as high, low, inside, outside, or curved, that he might be inhibited from trying if he were pitching at a real batter.

When finished, the valves can be opened so that the figure can be deflated and stored.